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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANTANANARIVO 000040

SIPDIS

STATE FOR AF/E - MBEYZEROV  
PARIS FOR RKANEDA  
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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [MA](#)

SUBJECT: MAYOR MISSES OWN DEADLINE, PRESIDENT PUSHES AGENDA

REF: A. 09 ANTANANARIVO 17  
[1](#)B. 08 ANTANANARIVO 849  
[1](#)C. 09 ANTANANARIVO 09

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Eric Stromayer for reasons 1.4 B and D.

[1](#)1. (SBU) SUMMARY: The ongoing confrontation between Andry Rajoelina, Mayor of Antananarivo, and Marc Ravalomanana, President, continues to simmer along with heated rhetoric and big plans, but little action. Having avoided confrontation last weekend (reftel A), Rajoelina's anxiously-awaited January 13 ultimatum passed with little fanfare: action has been put off again, to a rally on January 17. Meanwhile, Ravalomanana's ambitious political party reforms sailed easily through parliament, in a clear demonstration of his power that portends trouble for a disorganized opposition. Having lost some of his momentum with the underwhelming response to his own deadline, Rajoelina and his allies head into the weekend with fewer options, and possibly less support, than a week ago. END SUMMARY.

DEADLINE PASSES, WITH SILENCE ON THE STREETS OF TANA

[1](#)2. (C) On January 13, observers in the capital anxiously awaited the unveiling of the implicit "or else" contained in Mayor Rajoelina's declaration one month prior, calling for media freedom and respect for democracy and human rights. In the event, action has been postponed yet again, to the inauguration of the Mayor's intended "Place de la Democratie" (in Parc Ambohitovo in downtown Antananarivo), at 1000 on Saturday, January 17. The announcement featured strongly worded language concerning the government's failure to respect individual rights and freedoms, democracy, and Malagasy values, but was more significant for the fact that Rajoelina appeared alone, without the opposition leaders that have flanked his speeches since early December. Opposition leaders have since affirmed their support in the press, but the level of coordination within the opposition is not clear.

Jean Max Rakotomamonjy of opposition party LEADER-Fanilo declared on January 14 that "we have the same convictions concerning democracy and freedom of expression...but as Mayor, he has other responsibilities, and we don't want to interfere".

[1](#)3. (C) Last weekend's ecumenical service at the Mahamasina covered stadium went smoothly and demonstrates a certain level of support for the mayor, fitting Rajoelina's publicly-stated goal of a peaceful new-year's service open to the public. As an indicator for this weekend's event, it is less useful: as a peaceful, coordinated, and contained event in a well-controlled venue with an overtly non-political message (even if reality was different), it appealed to a different crowd than that which might attend the next gathering. Without cover of religious service, the police

prefect may be bolder in denying permission or enforcing a ban on the activity as well. And while the event may appeal to a young, more boisterous audience (a rock concert has been promised), increased police scrutiny or presence may make much of last week's peaceful crowd wary of attending.

#### OPPOSITION MOMENTUM STALLING...

¶4. (C) This conflict has, to date, largely played out in the media - and neither side has missed an opportunity this week to lower the tone ever further. Ravalomanana has equated Rajoelina's campaign with terrorism, publicly stating that no individual should be able to hold a nation hostage to his agenda; he has also tried to shame Rajoelina, invoking the Malagasy respect for elders as a reason to back down. Rajoelina, in turn, continues to brand the government a dictatorship, repeating his mantra of media freedom, democracy and human rights. In media reports and public opinion, the two sides appear as obstinate as ever, which hasn't played well to a population that has no desire to return to the bad old days of Ratsiraka, but even less to relive the 2002 political and economic crisis.

¶5. (C) With the quiet expiration of the January 13 deadline, the opposition has lost some of its shine. There have been no major political developments or announcements since late December, no opposition platform or formal grouping has emerged, and the simple short-term goals that gave a diverse opposition cause for unity (such as reopening VIVA TV) are beginning to look short-sighted as the president ramps up the scale of his own agenda. Ravalomanana won by a huge margin in the 2006 presidential election (second-place Jean

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Lahiniriko garnered only 12% of the vote to Ravalomanana's 55%), and his support structure is wide-spread and well organized. Rajoelina was most popular playing the independent business leader that had stepped up to fight for Democracy and Human Rights. Tying himself to the formal opposition may have been tactically useful in December, but their fundamental unpopularity and inability to organize on a national level make it questionable as a long-term strategy.

#### ...WHILE RAVALOMANANA SCORES A VICTORY

¶6. (C) Continuing his strategy of ignoring the opposition's demands altogether, Ravalomanana convened a special session of parliament from January 12 to 15 to debate plans for political party reforms. By the final day, a constitutional amendment eliminating independent candidates and a new law regulating political parties had sailed through both chambers, and will become official pending a presidential decree on implementation. Officially, these reforms were designed to "control the unbridled multi-partyism" that had resulted in some 180 political parties nationwide, and to "bring professionalism into politics". In reality, the changes will likely increase the power of the president's already dominant party, TIM, and make it difficult for the current crop of regionally focused opposition parties to survive.

¶7. (C) The biggest changes are in the elimination of independent candidates, public financing based on party representation, ineligibility to head a party for foreign residents and those with a criminal record, the requirement that parties have representation in at least 12 (of 22) regions and hold a national congress every three years, and the rule that parties be closed if they fail to participate in three successive direct elections. Fears that it might be retroactively applied to current representatives were dismissed by the Minister of the Interior, who bears responsibility for elections, but the effects on the next round of elections could be immense: with around 50 mayors and 22 regional chiefs purportedly up for election in the coming months, very few parties other than TIM will be able to even participate.

18. (C) It is now more difficult to form political parties, and harder to maintain party status; the goal of reducing the number of parties has been accomplished, but at a heavy cost for all but TIM. Samuel Ralaidovy of AREMA has called it "liberticide", and a "monopolization that benefits only one man". While not directly connected to the conflict with the mayor (the reforms were launched in the weeks before the closure of VIVA TV), the link is clear: Rajoelina is himself an independent, several of his opposition cohort have criminal records, and the most contentious figure of all (Didier Ratsiraka) resides abroad. All would be ineligible under the new system, although Rajoelina could currently overcome that by seeking a party nomination.

STILL SIMMERING, NOT CLEAR WHAT'S TO COME

19. (C) COMMENT: These moves may provide the opposition with new fodder for the event on January 17, although it remains unclear how well-positioned they are to capitalize on it. Ravalomanana has successfully ignored the opposition thus far, and scored a victory of his own in the last week with political party reform, but there will be opportunity over the weekend for confrontation - either accidental or planned. The mayor is the leader of a movement he does not fully control, the cohesion of which is questionable at best. With the lack of action on January 13th, the opposition has lost some of its momentum, but as the rhetorical battle in the media continues, options on both sides for calm resolution may be slowly receding. END COMMENT.

MARQUARDT